

## THE *BHĀGAVATA* MSS FROM PALAM AND ISARDA— A CONSIDERATION IN STYLE

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Scholars of Indian painting are familiar with a series of miniatures which have hitherto been described as illustrations to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.<sup>1</sup> They belong to what is called the *kulāhdār* group and immediately invite comparison with sets such as the *Gīta-Govinda*<sup>2</sup> of the Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay, the *Chaurapañchāśikā*<sup>3</sup>, the *Rāgamālā*<sup>4</sup> of Vijayendra Suri collection, now in private possession, and the *La Chandā*<sup>5</sup> of the Lahore Museum. The last mentioned group is now partly shared with the Chandigarh Museum after the partition of India and Pakistan. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* series was an extensive one and is now widely dispersed between museums and private collectors in India and abroad. Dr. B. N. Goswami has drawn our attention to the fact that this series has illustrations depicting the *Pārijāta Harāṇa* story which does not figure in the *Bhāgavata*. May be, it illustrates both the *Bhāgavata* and the *Pārijāta Harāṇa*. We have not examined this aspect. Our immediate purpose, however, is not the identification of the series but its probable provenance and date. On many illustrations of this series there are certain quite near-written inscriptions on the upper margins which read as *Sā. Mīṭhārām* or as *Sā. Nānā*. (Pl. XIV Fig. 14). Some of these paintings also have the name of a lady '*Hirā Bāi*', in addition to the name *Sā. Mīṭhārām* or *Sā. Nānā*. But the name '*Hirā Bāi*', wherever it appears, is in a different hand and is a later addition scrawled on the painted portion of the folio itself or on the lower margin. It is unlikely that the names *Sā. Mīṭhārām* and *Sā. Nānā* could be those of the painters of the miniatures. The constant repetition of the name of the painter on a series is practically unknown in Indian painting. The only exception we are aware of is the inscription on a Pahari set in the collection of the late Sir Cowasji Jehangir where the painter's name Amichand appears on the reverse of every painting in the series.<sup>6</sup> According to the probabilities are that this *Bhāgavata* series belonged to a joint Hindu family and that two senior members of the family, may be brothers, who used and treasured it the most, put their names on many of the paintings to indicate its ownership. Possibly the word *Sā.* stands for the prefix *Sāh* which suggests that the owner

<sup>1</sup> W. G. Archer and Edwin Binney, *Rajput Miniatures from the Collection of Edwin Binney 3rd*, Portland, 1968, No. 1 ac; Strachey Cary Welch and Milo Cleveland Beach, *Gods, Thrones, and Peacocks*, New York, 1965, No. 3a and 3b; Karl Khandalavala and Moti Chandra, and P. Chandra, *Miniature Paintings, A Catalogue of an Exhibition of the Sri Motichand Khajanchi Collection by Lalit Kala Akademi*, Delhi 1960, Pl. A, and Fig. 20; Milo C. Beach, 'Rajput and Related Paintings,' *The Arts of India and Nepal: The Nasli and Alice Heeramanek Collection*, Boston, p. 101; Sherman E. Lee, *Rajput Painting*, New York, 1967, No. 3a and d; Karl Khandalavala and Moti Chandra, *New Documents of Indian Painting—A Reappraisal*, Bombay, 1958, Pl. 21 and Figs. 199-200.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Khandalavala, "A Gita Govinda Series in the Prince of Wales Museum," *Bulletin of the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India*, No. 4, Bombay, 1954-54, pp. 1-19 and pls. 1-4. This article lists also some other paintings of the *kulāhdār* group.

<sup>3</sup> Leela Shiveshwarkar, *The Pictures of the Chaurapañchāśikā: A Sanskrit Love Lyric*, New Delhi, 1967.

<sup>4</sup> Norman W. Brown, "Some Early Rajasthani Raga Paintings," *J.I.S.O.A.*, Vol. XVI, Calcutta, 1948, pp. 1-10; Maurice Dimand, *Indian Miniature Painting*, (Uffizi Series), Milan (nd.), pls. 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Leigh Ashton (ed.), *The Art of India and Pakistan*, London, 1950, colour pl. A and p. 82; Karl Khandalavala and Moti Chandra, *New Documents of Indian Painting*, Figs. 188-195.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Khandalavala, *Pahari Miniature Painting*, Bombay, 1958, p. 144 ff.

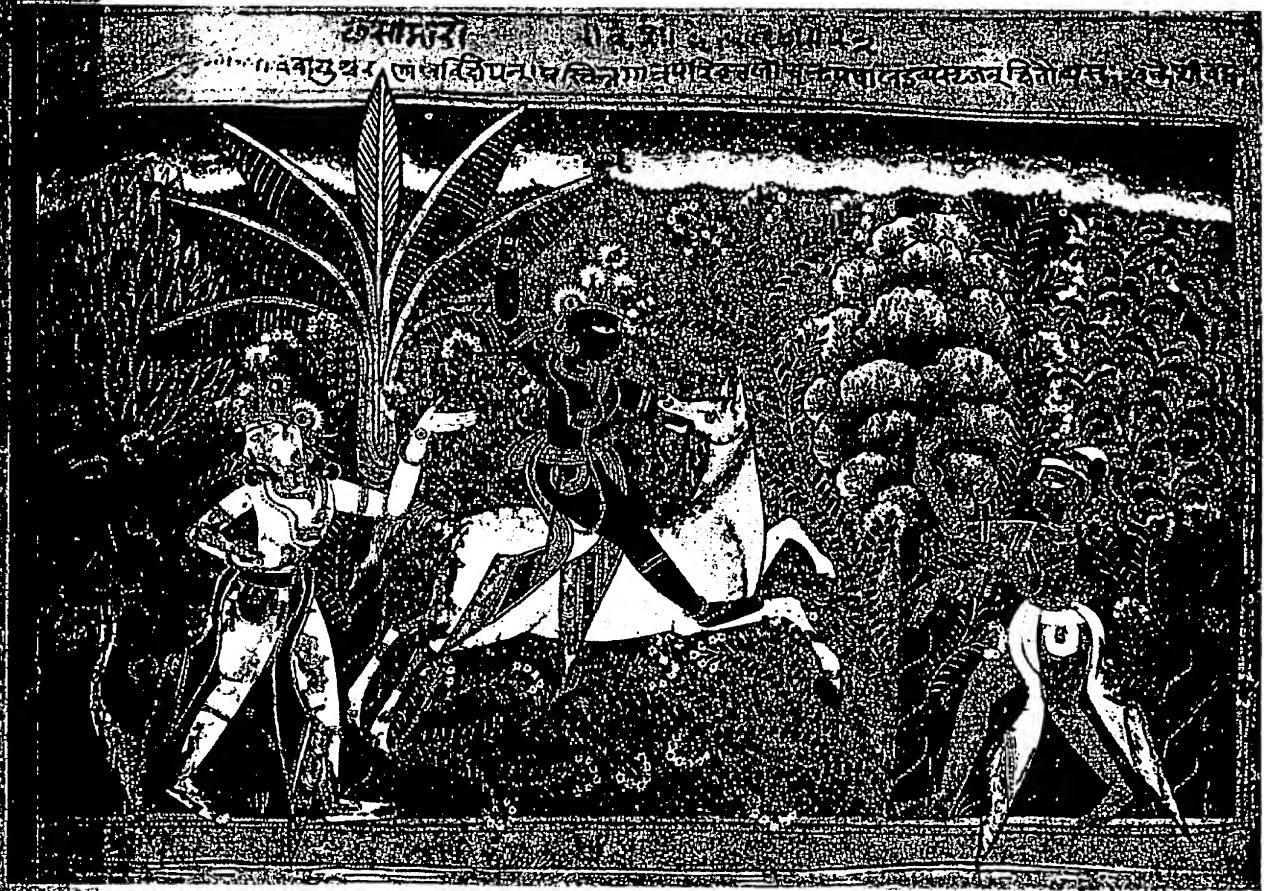


Fig. 1. Krishna killing the demon Kēśī. Folio from an illustrated MS. of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Probably Delhi-Agra region, c. 1550-1570 A.D. Size: 19 × 25.8 cm.



Fig. 2. Krishna at Kūljā's palace. From the same series as Fig. 1. Size: 19 × 26.5 cm.



Fig. 3. Cowherds carrying milk-pots. Folio from an illustrated MS. of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Probably Delhi-Agra region. c. 1550-1570 A.D. Size: 19 × 24.8 cm.



Fig. 4. Kṛishṇa stealing butter. From the same series as Fig. 3, Size: 14.3 × 22 cm.

belonged to the merchant class and had the set prepared for their own use. That members of the merchant class as well as others used to commission illustrated manuscripts for their personal use is well known. Significantly, on one miniature of this series, which along with several others was once in the possession of the well-known Jaipur dealer Shri Ram Gopal Vijayavargiya, the inscription on the top margin in addition to the name *Sā. Mīṭhārām* bore the words '*Pālam nagar madhye*', meaning 'in the city of Palam near Delhi'. The present ownership of this miniature is not traceable and hence we are not able to publish it. The inscription was quite clear and written in the same hand as the name *Sā. Mīṭhārām* and in line with it. The meaning of the inscription, however, raises difficulties. It could mean that the manuscript was prepared in *Pālam nagar* or it could equally well mean that it was possessed by Mīṭhārām in *Pālam nagar* where he and Nānā presumably resided. But even if the latter interpretation is more acceptable we feel that it would still indicate, even if indirectly so, that the manuscript was prepared in *Pālam nagar*. Our reason for this conclusion, which after all is tentative in the absence of definite evidence, is that Palam was a centre in which Kāyastha scribes and illustrators worked for the preparation of illustrated manuscripts in the sixteenth century. The colophon of the Palam *Mahāpurāṇa*<sup>7</sup> dated A.D. 1540 makes this quite clear. As the *Bhāgavata* illustrations in all probability belong to about the same date, or a little earlier or later,<sup>8</sup> the owners Mīṭhārām and Nānā who appear to have resided at Palam are not likely to have had the manuscript prepared and illustrated at an outside centre when scribes and illustrators were available to them in Palam itself. It must be remembered that the primary purpose of having such a manuscript prepared was for personal use—devotional or otherwise. The objective was not to secure an illustrated copy of high technical perfection. Significantly, the entire group of available Northern Indian bourgeois illustrated manuscripts of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, was rather rough in execution. Moreover, middle class folk, such as *zamindārs* and merchants, preferred to patronize the local artisans and artists. There was accordingly little likelihood of Mīṭhārām and Nānā desiring to secure the services of better scribes and illustrators outside Palam even if available. Thus whatever be the interpretation given to the inscription *Pālam nagar madhye* we believe it was meant to indicate that this *Bhāgavata* was prepared in Palam, the home town of Mīṭhārām and Nānā. Moreover, having regard to the fact that it is now fairly well established that the entire *Chaurapañchāśikā* group of manuscripts belongs to the northern belt from Delhi to Jaunpur, the likelihood of this *Bhāgavata* having been illustrated at Palam, mentioned in the inscription, is high indeed. The discovery of the *Āraṇyaka Parvan* MS,<sup>9</sup> dated A.D. 1516 illustrated by a Kāyastha artist in the Agra area, further supports our conclusion, since this *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is quite evidently a direct descendant of the *Āraṇyaka Parvan* style. Thus this inscription on a folio of the *Kulāhdār Bhāgavata Purāṇa* series, indicating its likely provenance as Palam tends to negative the previously suggested ascriptions of its provenance. Some critics had ascribed it to Mewar and some

<sup>7</sup> Karl Khandalavala and Moti Chandra, "Three New Documents of Indian Painting," *Bulletin of the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India*, No. 7, Bombay, 1959-1962, pp. 22-27 and Figs. 16-18 a-b; Karl Khandalavala and Moti Chandra, *New Documents of Indian Painting*, pls. 17 a-b, 18 a-b, 19 a-b, and Figs. 141-155.

<sup>8</sup> Khandalavala allowing for a fair margin of error suggests A.D. 1525-1570.

<sup>9</sup> The discovery of *Āraṇyaka Parvan* Ms. of A.D. 1516 painted in the Agra area well nigh settled this question. The matter is discussed at length in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay*, Vol. 38, 1963 (New Series) by Moti Chandra and Karl Khandalavala, whose monograph on the *Āraṇyaka Parvan* Ms., being published by the Asiatic Society of Bombay, is now in press. Some illustrations of the *Āraṇyaka Parvan* Ms., are published by Karl Khandalavala and Moti Chandra, *New Documents of Indian Painting*, col. pls. 13-16.



to Malwa. The inscription rather fortifies the viewpoint of Khandalavala and Moti Chandra that the entire *kulāhdār* group of paintings belongs to the northern belt from Delhi to Jaunpur rather than to Rajasthan or Malwa<sup>10</sup> though it may later on have influenced paintings in these areas.

More recently a few paintings from another incomplete *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* series came to our notice; they are now dispersed in private collections both Indian and foreign. They appear to be slightly later than the Palam *Bhāgavata* but are aesthetically more attractive. Basically, however, they cannot be separated in style from the *Chaurapañchāśikā* group, though the *kulāhdār* turban is absent. The figures, however, are usually more elongated and the use of trees and floral backgrounds is more in keeping with the *Gīta-Govinda* of the Prince of Wales Museum than the plainer *Chaurapañchāśikā* series. It is more lively than the *Chaurapañchāśikā*, and employs more attractive compositional effects.

The new *Bhāgavata* series also seems to have been painted in the Delhi-Agra region. Incidentally, its devotional character is amply in tune with the great movement of the Kṛishṇa cult that had by this time secured a firm hold over the Hindus of Northern India, particularly in the Mathura-Brindavan region near Delhi and Agra. Despite differences of detail, we feel that this series, like the Palam *Bhāgavata*, was also painted by artists then working in this area. Several features indicate the highly individual character of the new *Bhāgavata* series, in spite of its relation with the *Chaurapañchāśikā*, the Palam *Bhāgavata*, the Lahore *Laur-Chandā*, and the *Gīta-Govinda* of the Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay.

The new *Bhāgavata* signals an advance. It is more mature in its finishing, its refined colours and its expressive and vigorous drawing. Besides, it has marked lyrical charm, poetic imagery and care-free rhythmic vitality. Though some paintings of the *Chaurapañchāśikā* group also share these qualities, the maturer and more imaginative handling of the new *Bhāgavata* indicates that it is the work of the most significant painters of the period to which it belongs. We feel that by the time the new *Bhāgavata* was executed at least some painters of the Delhi-Agra region working in the Pre-Mughal Hindu tradition had achieved, may be due to contact with the early Mughal painters, greater technical dexterity than their predecessors.

Apart from the above noted qualitative differences the facial types and more noticeably the figures of the new *Bhāgavata* series differ somewhat from those of the *Chaurapañchāśikā* group.

The figures in the new *Bhāgavata* series appear taller due to elongation and are lithe and agile. The body colour of almost all the male figures, except of Kṛishṇa who is a slightly dark indigo-blue, and Balarāma who is white, is an ocherish golden-yellow instead of the yellow commonly seen in the *Chaurapañchāśikā* group. The female figures are painted either in glowing orpiment or in various tones of ochre, to differentiate the fair and dark-bodied ones. The white colour, prepared out of *khadiyā* (chalk) has flaked off in all the paintings of the new *Bhāgavata*. Gold has not been used in any of these paintings, nor is it to be seen in the *Chaurapañchāśikā* group.

The ornaments are of the designs commonly seen in *Chaurapañchāśikā* group of paintings including the horizontal ivory peg ear ornament which is a peculiarity of this group.

The *chākdār jāma* and the *kulāhdār* turban are absent in the paintings so far known to us from the new *Bhāgavata* series. But only a part of the series has come to light. Men of status wear a *dhoti*, while the cowherds wear a short loin-cloth. Some of the men folk wear small turbans which are closely tied to the head.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Khandalavala and Moti Chandra, *New Documents of Indian Painting—A Reappraisal*, Bombay, 1969.

are somewhat different from the turbans seen in the *Chaurapañchāṣikā* group. The hair of the young boys is tied on the top of their heads with flowers.

The architectural forms and their details evidence similar conventions both in the new *Bhāgavata* and the *Chaurapañchāṣikā* group of paintings. Likewise, the landscape with formalized and decorative trees, and the blossoming creepers that entwine their trunks and droop around the foliage can be matched for its emotion-laden lyricism and exuberance with the *Gīta-Govinda* series. The only new convention introduced for the new series is the depiction of the mango tree (Pl. IX, Fig. 1), and another tree, possibly the *neem* in which the artist has attempted to show the foliage in masses with tiny leaves worked on them (Pl. IX, Figs. 1, 2). Moreover, the foliage-masses have shading which separates each mass and gives an illusion of depth seen for the first time in Indian miniatures and later in some Rajasthani paintings of the seventeenth century. The picture space in the new *Bhāgavata* series is not divided into compartments which was an early conventional clarity of narration, as we find in the *Āraṇyaka Parvan* and the Palam *Bhāgavata*. It is simplified here and is less abstract in its approach. The compositions mostly depict single incidents or episodes, as in the *Chaurapañchāṣikā*. Moreover, like in the latter set the paintings are composed of a few figures only, a circumstance which makes for commendable clarity, directness and boldness in the paintings as well as the narrative. However, the colours used for the backgrounds, following the Pre-Mughal Hindu tradition, are restricted; only red, yellow, blue or green are generally used. But at times, in some paintings, the background colour and the colour within the architectural framework is different (Pls. IX-X, Figs. 1, 2). So also in Pl. IX, Fig. 1 different colours are used in the central portion, showing the encounter between Kṛṣṇa and the horse demon Keśi, and on the two sides with trees. This is to emphasize or stress, according to the requirement of the narration, the importance of the characters. Yet the new *Bhāgavata*, like the Hindu *kulāhdār* paintings, is imbued with a largeness of conception and gives the impression that these paintings may have been intended to be key-sketches for murals.

Another feature, seen only in a few paintings of the new *Bhāgavata* series, is the depiction of a river diagonally dividing the entire picture space and in its onward thrust penetrating even the borders.<sup>11</sup> The waves and ripples of the surging water are shown with minute and vibrant white lines which create an illusion of moving water. Was this convention for the treatment of water borrowed from the painters of the early Akbari atelier or did the Akbari painters borrow it from the new *Bhāgavata* series? The answer depends on the viewpoint as to the date of the new *Bhāgavata*.

On the whole, this new *Bhāgavata* represents the pre-mughal Lodi style at its best. We see some of these elements in a few paintings of the formative period of Akbari manuscripts such as the *Tilasm* of the Raza Library, Rampur,<sup>12</sup> and the *Hamza Nāma*. It may well be that along with several other indigenous painters, the Hindu painters then working in the northern belt, Delhi-Agra-Jaunpur, also joined Akbar's Imperial atelier soon after it was organized. Later it may have influenced Rajasthani painting.

We have already said the new *Bhāgavata* is slightly later than the Palam *Bhāgavata*, which is variously

<sup>11</sup> Walter M. Spink, *Krishnamandala—A Devotional Theme in Indian Art*, The University of Michigan. Ann Arbor, Special Publication No. 2, 1971, Figs. 11 and 117.

<sup>12</sup> Stuart Cary Welch, *A Flower From Every Meadow*, New York, 1973, Fig. 7.

<sup>13</sup> K. K. Khandalavala and Jagdish Mittal, "An Early Akbari Manuscript of *Tilasm* and Zodiac," *Lalit Kālā*, No. 14, pp. 26-30 and Figs. 1-33.

dated between A.D. 1525 and 1570. Hence the new *Bhāgavata* paintings, can be assigned a date between A.D. 1550-75.

The new *Bhāgavata* series is known to dealers as the Isarda *Bhāgavata* because it came from the collection of the Isarda Thikānā. The late Maharaja of Jaipur was adopted to the Jaipur throne from Isarda. The fact that the series came from the Isarda collection is no guide to its provenance. In fact, the *Pālam Bhāgavata* was found with a Vaishṇava merchant in Hyderabad and yet it is by no means a product of the Deccan. The feudal fort of Isarda can be seen on the rail journey from Sawai Madhopur to Jaipur. There does not seem to be any likelihood of *Sā. Miṭhārām* and *Sā. Nānā* being the painters of this series though this has been suggested. A survey of all available material indicates at least two or three distinct hands who executed this series. One artist is more mature and careful as far as the quality of drawing and the finishing is concerned; the second artist is rougher and hasty in execution and his figures have bigger heads, while there are pages where the execution is even more rough and hasty, possibly by a third artist. The names *Miṭhārām* and *Nānā* appear on several pages, irrespective of the fact whether the execution is mature or rough. These names also appear individually on carefully executed pages with mature drawing as also on other pages attributable to a second artist. Hence the possibility that these two names are of the artists of this series, apart from other factors, need not be considered. The series illustrates also the *Rukmiṇi Haran* episode, which forms a part of Book Ten of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (see the English translation by J. M. Sanyal, *The Srimad Bhāgavatam*, Vol. II, New Delhi 1973). Hence it appears that the *Pālam Bhāgavata* series illustrates Book Ten of the *Bhāgavata*.